

INTRODUCTION

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, for the record my name is Daniel Corradini. I'm a senior therapeutic youth care worker at the SMAH in Missoula. It is a shelter within the Youth Homes organization, I've been employed there for over three years and I've been working with a variety of youth in different capacities off-and-on for over 10 years.

SHELTER CARE

I'm here today, because I believe the work that we do is vital to the health and success of our local community. Although it is termed, 'Shelter Care', the services that we provide are much more extensive and encompassing than the name implies. One fond memory I have is seeing the smile of possibility after one particular child got to visit the dentist for the first time in her life. Another memorable moment is getting a doctor's appointment for a teenage boy with horrible acne and having it addressed for the first time in his life and seeing the self-confidence burst forth once his face began to clear. We do shelter kids in need and provide the basic necessities, but that alone doesn't magically heal these children, it only begins the process. It is the much more important interactions, expectations, conversations, successes & failures that occur while we provide the basic needs of stability, that offer a footing for these kids to build upon.

TEACHERS

It's difficult to describe all the different hats that we wear on the regular basis, but I believe at the core, we are teachers. We're not teachers in the conventional sense- math, english, science, although we do a bit of that as well. But rather we are teachers in the same way talented parents are teachers every day. We teach respect for others, personal responsibility, healthy self-esteem, positive relationships, communication skills, importance of connection to the community, coping skills, positive self-identity, a positive work ethic, and much more. We teach these principles through such activities as; regular community service- as caretakers of the California Street bridge, being regular visitors to the local animal shelter, engaging kids in creative endeavors on the daily basis, creating a daily structure that includes contributing to the house and promoting each individuals particular strengths. We are the grunts of the group home world, who get kids in crisis in their most raw form; whether that be after a physical altercation with their family, homeless, under the influence, victims of abuse or neglect, runaways, delinquent behavior, or any other combination you can imagine. They are kids in dire need of respect, compassion & structure and I believe that we do help them become more successful members of the community.

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SUCCESS

On the weekly basis I get to see the success of our program through the visitation and regular contact of past residents. They drop-by to say hi and tell us what they have been up to, or call to tell us of a personal success. One regular visitor and past resident, gives us periodic updates on his GED progress and even has come back on numerous occasions to make dinner for the house. While another young man, a current enlisted service member, visited regularly for months before shipping out to basic training because it was the closest thing to a 'home' he had ever experienced in his youth. Another young woman has written letters to us consistently since her departure more than two years ago, continually giving us updates on herself and always wanting to hear back from staff.

Several past residents have come to show-off their children beaming with pride, while others come around with friends because they're in the neighborhood and wish to say hello to certain staff members. And still others have come-by unexpected on a cold night for a cup of tea, a bit of warmth, a meal and a caring ear. All of these visitors, and many more like them, exemplify one of the most important goals we try to attain as caregivers- to create a positive relationship-a bond- and thereby forming one of the most important protective factors for youth development. Positive bonding, according to the 'Risk Factors/Protective Factors Theory, makes up for many other disadvantages caused by other risk factors' or negative environmental characteristics present (2-12).

STABILITY

I focus on these successes and these bonds formed because without stability of staff they wouldn't be present. I'm grateful for the assistance provided over the years in support of our program, however I do feel a significant discrepancy is present in terms of funding for it. As a full-time employee, a university degree and experience is required for employment, but a wage of around \$20,000 is all that is afforded, with a maximum wage not much higher than that. I believe a safe and stable environment is paramount in successfully making a change in youth and this runs hand-in-hand with retaining talented workers more permanently. With increased funding I believe a more permanent & talented staff would result, ultimately providing an increased quality of care, stability & efficiency- a positive feedback cycle that builds on itself. It is investing now, in the youth today, that ultimately not only improves their lives, but addresses the negative feedback cycles that would inevitably have to be dealt with later. I believe that shelter care is one of the effective and necessary instruments to help families & youth learn to better themselves, like the old proverb says, "Give a man a fish and feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime."

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I thank you for your time today and encourage you to come visit and see our house for yourselves.

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